

*** A Distributed Proofreaders Canada eBook ***

This eBook is made available at no cost and with very few restrictions. These restrictions apply only if (1) you make a change in the eBook (other than alteration for different display devices), or (2) you are making commercial use of the eBook. If either of these conditions applies, please check with an FP administrator before proceeding.

This work is in the Canadian public domain, but may be under copyright in some countries. If you live outside Canada, check your country's copyright laws. **If the book is under copyright in your country, do not download or redistribute this file.**

Title: The Jest of Hahalaba

Date of first publication: 1928

Author: Edward Plunkett (Lord Dunsany) (1878-1957)

Date first posted: Jun 1 2013

Date last updated: Jun 1 2013

Faded Page eBook #xx

This eBook was produced by: Delphine Lettau & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <http://www.pgdpCanada.net>

THE JEST OF HAHALABA

Drawn from:

Seven Modern Comedies

By

Lord Dunsany

G. P. Putnam's Sons
London & New York

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

SIR ARTHUR STRANGWAYS.

SNAGGS, *his butler.*

AN ALCHEMIST.

HAHALABA, *the Spirit of Laughter.*

THE JEST OF HAHALABA

SCENE: The Smoking Room, Sir Arthur Strangways' house in London.

Time: The last moments of 1928. Bells are ringing in the New Year. Sir Arthur is in an armchair.

Enter Snaggs, his butler.

SIR ARTHUR. A happy New Year to you, Snaggs.

SNAGGS. A happy New Year to you, Sir Arthur, and many of them.

SIR ARTHUR. Ah, thank you, Snaggs.

SNAGGS. There's a man to see you, Sir Arthur, who....

SIR ARTHUR. Oh yes, yes.

SNAGGS. ... who says he wants to see you, Sir Arthur.

SIR ARTHUR. Yes, show him up, please.

SNAGGS. He's, if I may say so, Sir Arthur, a very strange person.

SIR ARTHUR. Yes, I know. Show him up.

SNAGGS. Very strange indeed.

SIR ARTHUR. Yes, I was expecting him.

SNAGGS. And it's very late, Sir Arthur.

SIR ARTHUR. Yes, never mind.

SNAGGS. As you wish, Sir Arthur.

SIR ARTHUR. Yes, show him up, please.

SNAGGS. As you wish.

[Exit, leaving Sir Arthur sitting thoughtful.]

*Re-enter with the Alchemist in a dull maroon cloak, elderly,
bearded, and dressed like nobody later than Teniers.*

SNAGGS. The man to see you, Sir Arthur.

[Snaggs lingers.]

SIR ARTHUR. Thank you, Snaggs. Thank you.

SNAGGS (*reluctantly dismissed*). Thank you, Sir Arthur.

SIR ARTHUR. You have the stuff? (*Alchemist shows an old snuff-box and taps it, nodding his head.*) And the words?

ALCHEMIST (*in a sort of whisper*). Yes.

[Sir Arthur takes the snuff-box.]

SIR ARTHUR (*extending hand*). Give me the words.

ALCHEMIST. They may not be written.

Re-enter Snaggs.

SNAGGS. I will wait up, Sir Arthur, in case you should ring. If you should ring I would come at once.

SIR ARTHUR. Thank you, Snaggs. Thank you. (*Exit Snaggs. Sir Arthur goes to door and locks it.*) You will tell me the words?

ALCHEMIST. There's laws in England against the likes of me.

SIR ARTHUR. Laws?

ALCHEMIST. Any time since the days of Edward the Confessor.

SIR ARTHUR. But you will tell me the words.

ALCHEMIST. Aye. But we must proceed softly.

SIR ARTHUR. All is quiet. We may start now.

ALCHEMIST. You have another door.

SIR ARTHUR. Oh, no one ever comes that way.

ALCHEMIST. It is better locked.

SIR ARTHUR. Perhaps it is. (*He locks it.*) Now.

ALCHEMIST. The powder then is placed upon the floor in a ring, wide enough to contain two feet, and two and a half times as wide should you dare to call up Eblis.

SIR ARTHUR. No, no. I shall not call up Eblis.

ALCHEMIST. That is something, Master. That is something. That is one thing to be thankful for in all this bad business. I couldn't have borne it, Master. His mouth alone: I couldn't have borne to look at it.

SIR ARTHUR. No, no. I do not wish to see Eblis.

ALCHEMIST. I couldn't have borne to see him.

SIR ARTHUR. You shan't see him. Tell me the words.

ALCHEMIST. Well, Master, you put the powder in a ring, wide enough to hold common feet, scarce larger than ours. And then, Master, if you must, you light it. If you must, Master, if you must. And it smoulders and the smoke goes away to the left and the right, and goes round the ring. And just as the two smokes meet, just then you say (*he whispers*). And you name the spirit that you would call up. And he must come. And he must grant one wish, the first demand that you make of him. And I wish I had never told you, and I wish I had never come.

SIR ARTHUR. Never mind that now. Let's get on with the business.

ALCHEMIST. Well, Master; then, there be many spirits. There's the spirit of Death, the spirit of Drought, the spirit of Fever.

SIR ARTHUR (*now preparing the ring*). No, no. I'll have some jolly spirit.

ALCHEMIST. Oh, Master, call up the spirit of Death, the spirit of Fever, even the spirit of Terror, but not the spirit of Laughter.

SIR ARTHUR. The spirit of Laughter? Why not? I like the sound of him. We'll have the spirit of Laughter.

ALCHEMIST. Oh, Master, not that spirit.

SIR ARTHUR. Why not?

ALCHEMIST. Why, Master, because all these spirits, they are all at enmity with man, and are over full of ingenuity: it always was so. And they sit for ages planning how to prevail against man. For ages, Master. You would hardly believe it. And when they have formed a plan they won't rest until they have tried it; you would not credit their malice. And most of all are they like this, most of all when they have been compelled to grant a wish. They are like it then most of all.

SIR ARTHUR. Then we won't have the spirit of Death.

ALCHEMIST. Oh, Master, the spirit of Laughter is the worst of all but one. His contrivances are beyond the wit of all the lesser spirits. You are not making the circle too wide, Master?

SIR ARTHUR. No, no. We'll only have the spirit of Laughter.

ALCHEMIST. Be warned, Master, and have none of him.

SIR ARTHUR. Come, tell me his name.

ALCHEMIST. Be warned, Master.

SIR ARTHUR. I've paid you well for this.

ALCHEMIST. Yes, Master, but be warned.

SIR ARTHUR. His name, then.

ALCHEMIST. His name, (oh, Master, call never upon this spirit,) his name is Hāhālābā.

SIR ARTHUR. So that's his name. The spell again.

[Sir Arthur now holds a matchbox. Alchemist whispers in his ear. Sir Arthur ignites the powder and mutters the spell, ending with the name Hahalaba. Hahalaba steps through a curtain and stands in the ring, an athletic spirit, with small cloak slung over dark nude breast.]

HAHALABA. What is your will of me?

ALCHEMIST. Oh, Master, nothing that he can turn to his advantage.

SIR ARTHUR. It shall be nothing. I have thought of all.

ALCHEMIST. Only a trifle, Master. Something too small for his contrivances, or....

SIR ARTHUR. It is only a trifle.

HAHALABA. What is your will of me?

SIR ARTHUR. Only a trifle. I wish to see a file of the *Times*.

HAHALABA. For what year?

SIR ARTHUR. For the year 1929.

ALCHEMIST. 1929!

HAHALABA (*pulling cloth from table and revealing a file of one year of the Times*). It is there.

SIR ARTHUR. Ha!

HAHALABA. Within an hour of midnight it will vanish.

SIR ARTHUR. Oh. We have not long then.

HAHALABA. It has far to go, and must be there by dawn.

SIR ARTHUR. Where?

HAHALABA. In the deeps of time.

[Exit.]

SIR ARTHUR. Where has he gone?

ALCHEMIST. He has gone back.

SIR ARTHUR. To work, then.

ALCHEMIST (*as Sir Arthur gets half sheets and pencil and turns to the heap*). Oh, Master, I'm glad you asked for a little thing. It's a mercy, Master, a mercy.

SIR ARTHUR. A *little* thing, indeed!

ALCHEMIST. Aye, Master. For had you asked a great thing of such as him, he would have triumphed surely.

SIR ARTHUR. A little thing!

ALCHEMIST. Aye, Master, I know the ways of them.

SIR ARTHUR. A little thing, be damned. I shall make millions on this. Millions.

ALCHEMIST. Oh, Master, beware Hahalaba. Beware the spirit of Laughter.

SIR ARTHUR. I tell you I shall make millions. This alone for instance, this alone: December 31st, 1929: I see he's got December on the top the way the newspaper people keep it, they put the fresh paper on top of the one of the day before all the year round, and keep the lot like *this*: this number alone is worth all the money I've got, or you either. Patangas 104. You go down to the City and buy Patangas. But you don't understand.

ALCHEMIST. Master, I go to no city guided by Hahalaba.

SIR ARTHUR. He's got nothing to do with it. He's gone. But I read* in the *Times* that Patangas are 104. (*Jots down a word on half sheet, saying aloud "Patangas."*) I shall soon know if this file is genuine by waiting a few days and checking these. (*He lays his hand on the edges at bottom of heap.*)

* Present tense.

ALCHEMIST. Oh, it is genuine. He may not lie. But he is frivolous and cunning. I know Hahalaba.

SIR ARTHUR. If this is genuine (*reads a line or two*), as it evidently is, I shall make millions. There we are again, there we are again. Pocohontas 37. Who'd have thought it? I haven't paid you enough, old fellow. I haven't paid you enough.

ALCHEMIST. Master, I ask no more. I ask no more that comes from Hahalaba.

SIR ARTHUR. Nonsense. It comes out of the *Times*. And I'm the only man that's got a copy. November 20th this is, 1929. And the only one in the world. If you'd care for half a million you can have it. It will be nothing to me.

ALCHEMIST. No, Master. No.

SIR ARTHUR. Or a million for that matter.

ALCHEMIST. No, Master, I have no uses for it.

SIR ARTHUR. As you like. (*Lower down the file.*) And here again. Tangerines at 80. Hullo. Here's old Perrot dead. He should have kept himself fit: he was no older than me. If he'd have played golf. Well, well. October 27th.—Fancy that. (*Takes another paper.*) Hullo, hullo. (*Makes brief note.*) I'll play hell with the Stock Exchange.

ALCHEMIST. Master.

SIR ARTHUR. Ha, ha! Lord! Bolivian United. Well, I never.

[*Makes note.*]

ALCHEMIST. Master.

SIR ARTHUR. *And* Ecuador Guaranteed. Millions!

ALCHEMIST. Master.

SIR ARTHUR. Well.

ALCHEMIST. I have given you your desire, and you have paid me well. Our account is settled. May I go hence?

SIR ARTHUR. Go hence? Yes, if you like.

ALCHEMIST. Thank you, Master; for of all spirits of evil I fear most the spirit of Laughter.

SIR ARTHUR. Yes, you told me that. No one's keeping you. But wait a moment. Wait a moment. There's one thing I'll give you that you'll understand how to use. Wait a moment.

ALCHEMIST. Master, I go not to that city.

SIR ARTHUR. No, it's not the City. Wait a moment. Ah, here we have it. The Derby. Aurelian won. You back Aurelian for the Derby. (*Writes on a half sheet and gives it to Alchemist.*) There. Aurelian for the Derby.

ALCHEMIST. Master, I make no wager, lest in my hour of gain Hahalaba mock me. (*He puts paper down on a table.*) And Master——

SIR ARTHUR. Well, never mind now. There's only a few more minutes, and I can't waste them talking. They're worth a million a minute.

ALCHEMIST. As you will, Master.

SIR ARTHUR. Well, good-bye then, and thank you very much. (*Alchemist tries the door, it is locked.*) Ah, the door. Give me a moment and I'll let you out. (*He takes key from pocket, but continues reading papers and making notes.*) Another of them. Tromkins now. Why can't they keep themselves fit? Mexican Airways Limited! Well, well. (*Another note. Hastily turns over papers, making brief notes, till he nears the bottom of the heap.*) Yes, yes. Well, that'll be enough. There's millions in it. I'll let you out now.

[*Walks to the door with key in one hand, the last paper in the other.*]

ALCHEMIST. Thank you, Master, thank you.

SIR ARTHUR. And your friend Hahalaba will find it hard to laugh over this deal, for I'm the richest man in England now.

ALCHEMIST. Not yet, Master.

SIR ARTHUR. Well, I soon will be.

[Unlocks door.]

ALCHEMIST. And Master. Read no more of these hidden things. It is surely enough. Tempt Hahalaba no further.

SIR ARTHUR. I won't. I've read all I want. I've enough knowledge to put against the brains of all the financiers in London.

ALCHEMIST. Then read no further, Master. Put it down.

SIR ARTHUR. That? Do you know what that is? That is to-day's paper. January 1st, 1929, the last of the heap. I shall read to-day's paper before I go to bed. We're in 1929 now. Well, good-bye, and a happy New Year.

ALCHEMIST. Farewell, Master.

[Exit. Sir Arthur returns to his chair and settles down to the British habit of reading the day's Times.]

SIR ARTHUR. Nothing of interest. Dull, I suppose, after the other. Hullo! What's this? What? What? But it can't be! But this is to-day's paper! But I'm alive! Good God. (*With breath coming short he goes to decanter of brandy, pours out, mixes, and drinks. He stands a little steadier, hand to heart now and then.*) Bit of a shock that. Read that kind of thing. Silly Jugginses. Who can have been fool enough to invent a yarn like that? It's to-day's paper and I'm quite well. (*But the improvement was only momentary and he rings for Snaggs, then he goes panting to the sofa and lies down.*) Bit of a ... shock, that.

Enter Snaggs. Goes to Sir Arthur on sofa. All the copies of the Times have vanished.

SNAGGS. Hullo. What's this has happened? (*Goes to table and sees Sir Arthur's notes on half sheets.*) Patangas? Mexican Airways? Nothing to account for it there. (*Almost absently he crumples them and throws them in the fire; then turns to the business in hand.*) Now what should I do? (*A glance towards the sofa. Then he goes to the telephone.*) Ah, would you please give me the *Times*. I don't know the number. Yes, the *Times* Office, please. Is that the *Times*? Oh, could I speak to the Editor?... Oh, well, perhaps he'd do. But it's important.... Tell him something sudden.... Oh, yes. I'm butler to Sir Arthur Strangways. Mr. Snaggs is *my* name.... Well, I thought you'd like to know Sir Arthur has just died.... Sudden like.... Yes. (*Leaving the 'phone, he passes the other table on which Alchemist had put down his slip. He picks it up and reads.*) Aurelian for the Derby. *He's* no good.

CURTAIN

[The end of *The Jest of Hahalaba* by Lord Dunsany]